DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Public Health Service

B.D. Davis
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland 20892
Building : 16
Room : 207
(301) 496- 2968

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Dear Colleague,

The initially justified criticisms of fraud in science have become an additional facet of a growing antiscience movement, and I am writing to enlist your help in combatting this threat. My interest in taking this initiative arises partly from my chairmanship of the Public Affairs Advisory Committee of the Amer. Soc. Biochem. & Mol. Biol., but I am writing as an individual and not on behalf of the committee.

The hearings held by Representative John Dingell on this issue were launched on the basis of the assertion that it is causing substantial waste of taxpayers' money. Walter Stewart and Ned Feder led the subcommittee to include in their hearing a paper by David Baltimore and colleagues. However, it soon became apparent, and has since been confirmed by an outside Committee set up by the NIH, that there was no deception or other misconduct; the paper contained some errors, but these did not invalidate its conclusions.

Ideally this outcome would have halted further public discussion; it might even have led to an apology for the unfair implications arising from the initial confusion of error with fraud; and the issue would become one of judgment about what errors are significant enough to [illegible] published retraction. Unfortunately, the term fraud has meanwhile been replaced by the broader term misconduct, and Dingell's aim has changed. The report of the Committee on Energy and Commerce at the end of the last congressional session states: "The Subcommittee has a growing concern about the conditions necessary to ensure the preeminence of American science over the coming decades. It is especially concerned about factors which may damage the creativity of American science. One factor is the growing problem of misconduct in science...."

Scientists have even more interest than legislators in discouraging fraud, and in promoting science; but discussion of the issue in broad perspective has been conspicuously lacking. Aware of the threat of Congressional censure, the report of the external committee appointed by the NIH, and the response of the NIH administration, focused entirely on identifying errors in the Baltimore paper, however small, and on ensuring their public correction. Hence, while the authors were absolved of misconduct

in their publication, they were severely criticized for having published too limited a retraction, and they would apparently now be guilty of misconduct if they did not publish correction of even trivial clerical errors.

Clearly, the precedent set by these responses can have serious damaging effects: on the pattern of research and of publication, on the recruitment of young scientists, and on public confidence. It is up to scientists to try to educate the public and legislators on the crucial distinction between fraud and error, on the inevitability of error in science, and on the reasons why most errors are bypassed rather than formally corrected. But in addition to discussing these issues in general terms, I would suggest that some concrete evidence of the inevitability of error might have more impact.

I am therefore inviting you, and a number of other members of the National Academy of Sciences working in the biomedical sciences, to write a paragraph on "My biggest error in research." Barbara Culliton of Science is interested in putting together such a collection as a major news story. I had considered presenting this material as an article, but the requirement for formal review would probably slow it excessively.

In order to be able to include a large number of statements I would suggest that each be short, but not at the expense of an interesting explanation of how the error came about. Errors in findings are probably more instructive than errors of interpretation. Citation of the publication would probably be pertinent in some cases.

I hope you will be interested in this effort. If you do prepare a statement please send it to me at the above address, where I am at present a Fogarty Scholar; my permanent address is Microbiology, Harvard Med. School, Boston MA 02115.

Sincerely,

Bernard D. Davis